

# The past perfect simple

## Introduction



He suddenly realised that he'd **forgotten** about the meeting.

## Definition

The past perfect simple is used to talk about actions and activities which occurred sometime *//before//* a specific point in the past.

## Construction

**affirmative:**     subject + 'had' + past participle  
                         I'd **sent** an email.

**negative:**        subject + 'had' + 'not' + past participle  
                         I **hadn't sent** an email.

**interrogative:** 'had' + subject + past participle  
                         **Had** you **sent** an email?

## Uses

The past perfect simple is used to refer to actions and activities which occurred before a specified time in the past.

Usually, when we tell a story in the past, we use the **past simple** and **past continuous** but if we want to mention something which happened before the main narrative, we use the past perfect.

For example, this is a story of something that happened two months ago, so all events

before that are in the past perfect:

"I met Sandra for lunch a couple of months ago."

"Where did you go?"

"To that new Italian place in the High Street. The food was amazing and it was good to catch up - I **hadn't seen** her for two years."

"And how was she?"

"Really happy. She'd been planning a trip to Japan. She'd **decided** which cities to visit and **had** just **registered** for a Japanese course."

"**Had** she **booked** her flights?"

"No she was still comparing prices and **hadn't decided** which airline to go with."

The past perfect simple is particularly useful in the following situations:

| Situation  | Examples  |
|--|---|
| To talk about life experiences before and related to a past event. It does not matter exactly when the experience happened before the main narrative.  | "I went to Japan on business last month."<br>" <b>Had</b> you <b>been</b> to Japan before?"<br>"No I <b>hadn't</b> but I'd <b>met</b> a lot of Japanese people in my job so I was quite familiar with the culture."                                     |
| To talk about actions in a specific period, including someone's life. The period may be finished now but was unfinished at a point in the past. There is a suggestion that the situation might have changed after the point in the past. | I <b>hadn't seen</b> him much in the previous few years.<br><br>The U.K. <b>had had</b> thirty-seven Prime Ministers before a female one was elected.<br><br>He'd <b>written</b> four books by the time he was twenty.                                  |
| To explain something at a point in the past. It often answers the question, 'why?', and we may have been able to see a result in the past.   | I couldn't read it because I'd <b>lost</b> my glasses.<br><br>"Why were you so hot when you arrived?"<br>"I'd <b>run</b> all the way there."<br><br>I'd <b>spilt</b> milk all over the floor so I had to clear it up quickly before the guests arrived. |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>To report progress by a specific point in the past - talking about what had and had not been done.</p>   | <p>There was a meeting last Friday - by Thursday, I'd <b>booked</b> a room and <b>sent</b> an email to everyone with the details but I <b>hadn't written</b> the agenda or <b>ordered</b> the lunch.</p>  |
| <p>When something started in the past and continued until a later point in the past, we use the <b>past perfect continuous</b> but the past perfect simple can also be used as an alternative with certain verbs, including 'to live', 'to work', 'to teach' and 'to manage'.</p> <p>There is a suggestion of permanence similar to the difference between the <b>present simple</b> and <b>present continuous</b>.</p> | <p>I'd <b>lived</b> in that house for thirty years when I decided to move.</p> <p>I'd always <b>worked</b> for a big company before starting this job.</p> <p>She'd <b>taught</b> English for 20 years before she had a change of career and became a gardener.</p> <p>He'd <b>managed</b> the sales department since 1985 before retiring in 2010.</p> |
| <p>With <b>stative verbs</b> when we would usually use the <b>past perfect continuous</b>.</p>  | <p>I'd <b>known</b> him for a long time.</p> <p>I'd only <b>had</b> the car since Christmas but it broke down.</p>  |

## Words and expressions commonly used with the past perfect simple

### 1. Just and already

These are often used in the same way as in the present perfect simple. For example:

When I arrived, he'd **already left**.

When I saw him, he'd **just returned** from his trip to Japan.

### 2. By

We often use the word 'by' when we want to specify a time at or before which something was done or achieved. For example:

By 5 o'clock, I'd **drunk** seven cups of coffee and **sent** 45 emails but I **hadn't started** writing the weekly report.

She'd **had** four jobs by the time she was 30.

We drove from Scotland to Italy last summer. By the end of the holiday, we'd **visited** six countries, **stayed** in three hotels and **spoken** four different languages.

### 3. How long..? For/since

In those situations when we use the past perfect simple as an alternative to the continuous, we can ask questions using 'How long..?'

How long **had** they **been** married?

How long **had** you **lived** in London?

We can specify duration with either 'for' or 'since'. We use 'for' with a period of time and 'since' with a specific point in the past.

They'd **been** married for two years.

I'd **lived** in London since 2008.

Some more examples:

| For          | Since                            |
|--------------|----------------------------------|
| five minutes | the day/week/month/year before   |
| two hours    | the previous day/week/month/year |
| days         | October                          |
| three weeks  | 1974                             |
| a long time  | I was a child                    |

**Note that** in negative sentences with 'for' or 'since', there are different possible meanings between the past perfect simple and the **past perfect continuous**. The **past perfect continuous** is less likely to be heard. For example:

I **hadn't been** to the theatre for ages - so I was really happy when Susan invited me to see *Phantom of the Opera*.

[There was a long time between my last visit and Susan's invitation.]

I hadn't been going to the theatre for ages when I decided to start going again.

[I used to go to the theatre regularly, then I didn't go for a long time and then I started going again. This structure is much less likely to be heard than the simple form.]

**I **hadn't spoken** to Patty since Monday - she was on a business trip until Thursday.**  
**[We had no contact between Monday and Thursday.]**

**I hadn't been speaking to Patty since Monday but she apologised on Thursday and everything is OK now.**  
**[When we 'are not speaking to someone', it means we are deliberately not communicating because of an argument. So this means that between Monday and Thursday, we chose not to have any contact.]**

**Note that** these words and expressions can also be used with some other tenses.



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